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ABSTRACT

This report discusses challenges states face in working to increase the pace of reforms in standards, testing, and accountability and to ensure that tests are aligned with state standards and provide coherent information about student performance. It emphasizes challenges in turning around low-performing schools, including clearly identifying such schools, providing appropriate assistance, and taking tough action when schools persistently fail to improve, thus keeping students from languishing in these schools. The report defines low performing schools, explaining the information necessary to determine whether schools are failing (meeting absolute targets, growing over time, closing the gaps, and putting it together). An explanation of labels given to low-performing schools follows. Discussions include strategies for stepping in and taking over (e.g., bringing state and local resources to help schools turn themselves around), the application of sanctions when intervention does not create improvement and the development of a cadre of leaders to help ensure that schools do not reach the point of needing intensive intervention. An insert presents strategies for sustaining momentum in standards and accountability, noting such challenges to momentum as teacher quality, student support, test quality, accountability, and public engagement. (SM)

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ACCOUNTABILITY

Turning Around Low-Performing SCHOOLS

ONE OF THE MOST PRESSING CHALLENGES STATES FACE IS WHAT TO DO TO WITH SCHOOLS THAT ARE PERSISTENTLY FAILING. TURNING THEM AROUND REQUIRES CLEAR WAYS OF IDENTIFYING SCHOOLS THAT NEED HELP, PROVIDING THEM WITH APPROPRIATE ASSISTANCE, AND STEPPING IN AND TAKING TOUGH ACTION WHEN THEY CONTINUE TO FALL BEHIND. WITHOUT REAL ACCOUNTABILITY FOR RESULTS, STANDARDS WILL BECOME AN EMPTY PROMISE — AND ALL YOUNG PEOPLE DESERVE A FIRST-CLASS EDUCATION.

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Turning Around Low-Performing SCHOOLS

Thanks to the leadership of governors and other policymakers, states have been pursuing standards, testing and accountability policies since the early 1990s. But the new federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which is expected to be signed into law soon, will require most states to significantly pick up the pace of those reforms. Specifically, the law will require a substantial increase in the regularity of testing. The law's requirements will pose significant challenges to states to ensure that the tests are aligned with state standards and that they provide coherent information about student performance.

States also face a serious challenge over what to do to turn around low-performing schools. Policymakers on both sides of the aisle recognize that something must be done — now — to help those schools, but few states have put in place comprehensive policies and practices that will help schools improve. Turning them around requires clear ways of identifying schools that need assistance, providing them with appropriate assistance, and stepping in and taking tough action when schools continue to fall behind. States will have to do much more in the next few years in all of these areas.

Yet such efforts are critical. Without real accountability for results, too many students will continue to languish in schools that have persistently failed, and standards will become an empty promise. That is unacceptable. All young people deserve a first-class education.

WHAT IS A LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOL?

The first step in turning around low-performing schools is determining which schools need such assistance. But only half the states currently rate school performance. According to *Education Week's* "Quality Counts 2001," 17 states rate the performance of all schools, and another 10 identify low-performing schools only. Another eight states plan to rate schools or identify struggling schools soon.

The states that rate schools generally use three methods to define performance: meeting absolute targets (for example, requiring a certain percentage of students to reach the proficient level of performance on state assessments); making relative growth (for example, improving performance by a certain percentage over the previous year); and closing gaps in achievement between low performers and high performers. All three types of information are important in determining whether schools are failing to perform adequately. Yet about half the states that rate schools consider only the first method; only two states — Delaware and Wisconsin — use all three methods.

Meeting absolute targets: Of course states want schools to reach the desired level of proficiency, and schools that are not at that point need attention. But setting the right target requires a delicate balance. Setting it too high — for example, requiring schools to show that all students attained a high score on a challenging test — might mean that nearly all schools, including those with many successful students, could be considered low performing. On the

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Standards and Accountability

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Strategies for Sustaining Momentum

Barely a decade after the word "standards" entered the education policy lexicon, standards for student performance now are at the center of the education system in every state. The standards movement has generated many successes, yet states face a number of challenges as they implement their systems to ensure that all students reach challenging standards.

In an effort to help state officials take stock of their progress and examine what they need to do to sustain their momentum, Achieve and the members of the State Education Improvement Partnership — the Council of Chief State School Officers, the Education Commission of the States, the National Association of State Boards of Education, the National Conference of State Legislatures and the National Governors Association — held a two day forum in Arlington, Va., in April 2001. Some 135 educators, policymakers and business leaders from 35 states and the District of Columbia shared ideas and strategies.

The fact that such a large group of educators and policymakers from so many states met to consider these issues is a clear sign that there is a strong commitment to getting it right. And the public stands behind them. As a recent poll conducted by Public Agenda found, the overwhelming majority of Americans want to see the reforms continue or continue with some changes; only 2 percent want the effort to stop. "The core ideas underlying the movement are well-understood and accepted," said Robert B. Schwartz, the president of Achieve. "We need to focus on the challenges states face so the goals can be realized."

Signs of Success

Although standards, assessment and accountability systems in many states still are being developed, the systems are bearing fruit in a number of places. Schools, school districts and states can point to rising levels of student performance and know that state policies helped bring about those improvements.

From Houston to Philadelphia, from Rhode Island to California, standards are taking hold in American classrooms. Even the criticisms the standards policies are attracting represent evidence that the policies are starting to take effect. More significantly, the policies are starting to produce results, and many children — particularly those from low-income homes who have tended not to reach high standards before — now are performing at very high levels. Take Roosevelt Elementary School in Houston: A high poverty school with a large proportion of students whose first language is Spanish, the school is one of the highest performing in Texas. It was rated "exemplary" after more than 90 percent of its 575 students passed the state test. Why? Because the test measures the curriculum, and when scores indicate problems, the state directs resources to schools in need, according to the principal, Charlotte Parker. "A strong accountability system is the engine that drives this train to excellence," she said.

Such success breeds further success. More and more teachers act as though all children can learn at high levels once they see improvements in student learning and know that such improvements are possible. David W. Hornbeck, former Philadelphia superintendent of schools, said he noted this transformation in that district after the proportion of students performing at basic level and above increased by 44 percent in six years.

"They experienced it," he said. "They saw in front of their eyes kids who they used to think couldn't do this stuff, and lo and behold they did."

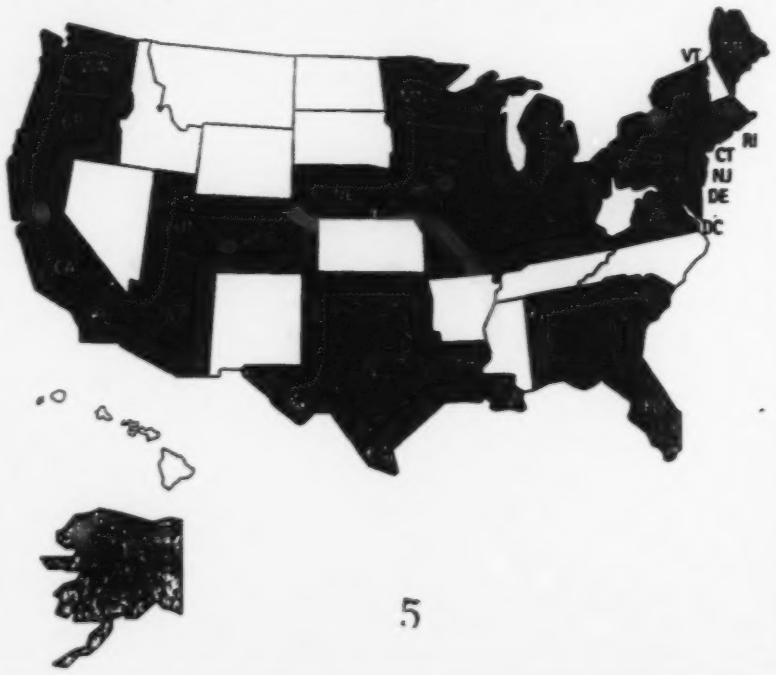
Challenges Ahead

While these successes are worth celebrating, no one would argue that the systems are working as they should in every district or state. Challenges include:

- ***Teacher quality.*** Perhaps the most significant challenge is ensuring that teachers are qualified to enable all students to reach high standards. This is a new goal for most teachers, and large numbers are not prepared to meet it. Too often, teachers who lack the necessary knowledge and skills respond to the test pressures by emphasizing test preparation, rather than deep instruction that would improve children's learning. States have a responsibility to develop teachers' knowledge and skills and ensure that they are qualified to teach all students to high standards. Without such efforts, accountability measures will not work. "We think that if we yell louder and demand more, teaching practices will change," said Peter McWalters, the commissioner of education in Rhode Island. "Unless we spend the money and time

States Work to Sustain Momentum

One hundred thirty-five policymakers and educators representing 35 states and the District of Columbia attended the forum.



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to get teachers developed, we can send all the memos we want, and teachers are not going to change."

- ***Support for students.*** Another major challenge is providing additional time and academic support for students who are struggling to meet standards. This is particularly necessary for students who lack basic skills and will face tough graduation requirements in the next few years. Without intensive efforts, states may face very high failure rates on exit examinations. Maryland has attempted to address this issue by developing a comprehensive plan to provide academic support for students, which includes identifying early those who need additional help and creating a network of learning opportunities to provide it. However, the state postponed implementing its high school exit test because the legislature did not provide full funding for its assistance plan. "It is unconscionable to have a high-stakes testing program if you can't answer, 'Did you provide support for students?'" said Nancy Grasmick, Maryland's superintendent of education.

Accountability systems contribute to improvement, not just determine rewards or sanctions.

- ***Improving tests.*** Although nearly all states have implemented testing programs, states still are working to guarantee that tests provide the kind of information that parents, teachers, administrators and policymakers need. One challenge is ensuring that they measure what the standards expect. As Achieve's work has shown, some states' testing systems fall short on this criterion — and a number of states use tests purchased off the shelf, which were not designed to measure a particular set of standards. Such tests send mixed messages to teachers about what is most important for students to learn. "States have tests that have nothing to do with their standards," said Diane Ravitch, a senior fellow at The Brookings Institution. Making sure that tests are comparable across schools and districts also is a high priority. If districts use different tests, it is difficult to know whether schools in different districts are succeeding in reaching state standards, and thus difficult to know what schools need to do to improve performance. Texas has addressed this issue by using a state test for all students in grades 3 through 8 and in high school. Susanna Navarro, executive director of the El Paso Collaborative for Academic Excellence, said the Texas state test has been a critical factor in ensuring that all districts, wealthy and poor, identify and address achievement gaps. "It makes a huge difference that different districts are using the same assessment," she said. Using comparable tests allows for comparable results, but it also can be cost-efficient, since each district does not have to develop its own tests. "It's hard enough to know why we have to have 50 tests in math," said Ravitch. "Why have 5,000 tests in math? If you don't have comparability, you're only testing for the sake of testing."
- ***Strengthening accountability.*** States also face challenges in building and developing accountability systems. While many are measuring student and school performance and putting in place mechanisms for rewarding success and applying sanctions for failure, few states have put all the pieces together. States need to have systems in place to identify schools that need improvement, to intervene in such schools and to apply sometimes harsh penalties for schools that persistently fail to improve. In developing such systems, states can learn a lot from business, which has had to retool to improve quality and performance substantially in the past decade. Corporate accountability systems include comprehensive data systems — more than just end-of-year outcomes data — that provide information throughout the year to help workers adjust their practice along the way. And the accountability systems contribute to improvement, not just determine rewards or sanctions. States also can learn from one another. They should work together and share information on accountability systems that produce results — and put them in place now, to focus educators' attention on performance. As the experience in business has shown, accountability systems are continually improving, and states need not wait until their system is functioning perfectly before

they begin. "I don't think standards-based reform can wait for the perfect system to be in place," said Stan Litow, the vice president for corporate and community relations for the IBM Corporation.

- ***Public engagement.*** A continuing challenge that nearly all states face is ensuring that the public supports the reform efforts. Although the public expresses support for standards and accountability in opinion surveys, states need to shore up support, particularly when accountability systems kick in. This is especially important in a few states where reform efforts face vocal opposition from determined critics.

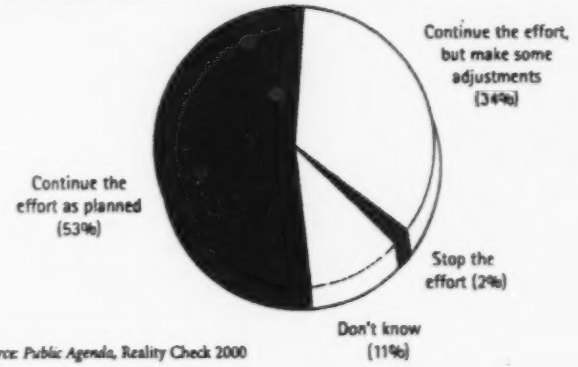
One way to build support is to make the system straightforward and easy to explain, as Texas has done. There, parents and educators know that a certain percentage of students have to pass the test for a school to earn recognition. Texas also releases all of its test items each year, so that there is no mystery about the expectations for students and schools. Another strategy, which Massachusetts has tried to use, is to highlight the work students who meet standards can do — and the kind of work students who do not meet the standards are performing. That way, people know the expectations are challenging and worthwhile. Building support among the public takes great effort, and not enough states have yet laid the necessary groundwork. "This is a political campaign," said William Guenther, the president of MassInsight Education, a business-led education coalition in Massachusetts. "It takes nuts and bolts organizing work to succeed."

Yet the biggest trump card the reformers hold is the success states and districts have experienced in improving student performance — since that, after all, is what the movement is about. And leaders across the country are committed to building on those successes. The fact that 135 educators, policymakers and business leaders got together to discuss ways to improve their education systems is a hopeful sign. These groups have shown they can work together to create strong policies and practices. "One of the best things that's happened in the last decade is direct dialogue between the education community and the business community," said Keith Bailey, the president of Williams. "If you get to common ground, you have the ability to come to constructive outcomes."

No Desire to Turn Back

The American public overwhelmingly supports efforts by policymakers to raise standards and achievement, although many parents agree that policies need adjustment.

When it comes to your school district's effort toward higher academic standards, do you think the school district should:



Source: Public Agenda, Reality Check 2000

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The first step in turning around low-performing schools is determining which schools need such assistance. But only half the states currently rate school performance.

other hand, setting the target too low might mask problems schools are facing in enabling students to reach challenging standards.

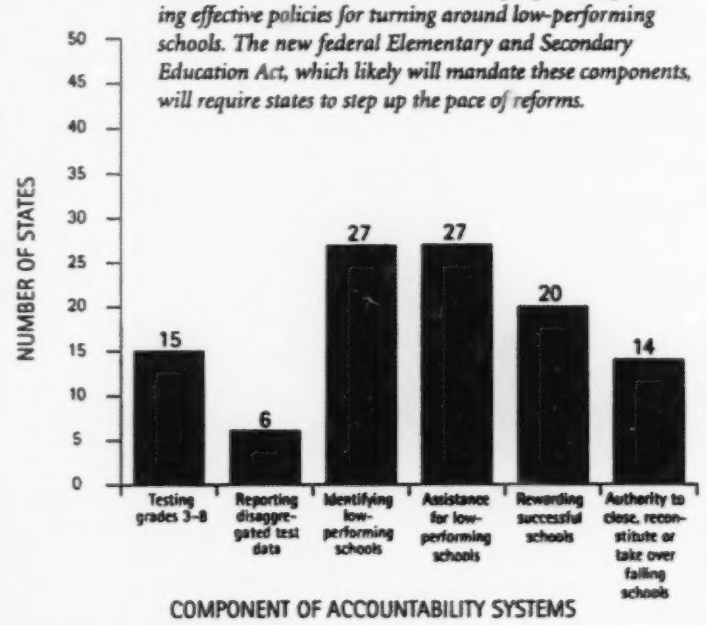
One state that has tried to walk this line carefully is Texas. There, the state recognized when it established its accountability system that schools had a long way to go to reach high levels of performance, so Texas initially set its target rather low: 25 percent of students had to pass the state test in order for a school to avoid a designation as low performing. But the state raised its target each year, and now 50 percent of students have to pass the test for a school to be considered acceptable. The state is now raising its standards and creating more rigorous tests.

Growing over time: Meeting targets for proficiency is important, but not all schools start at the same place — and some have much further to go for students to reach high levels of performance. Schools that are improving at a fast rate and are on target to reach the goal may be performing adequately, even if their performance does not reach the goal yet. At the same time, schools that already demonstrate high performance but fail to improve or maintain their high levels may be showing signs of trouble. California recognizes this problem by requiring schools to show steady gains of 10 percent of the distance between their starting point and proficiency each year to keep them on a path to the ultimate target; those that have already reached proficiency cannot stagnate or fall back.

Tennessee, meanwhile, has developed an unusual method for determining the "value added" that schools contribute to student performance. Using a complex statistical formula developed by statistician William L. Sanders, the state can estimate how much schools (and individual teachers) add to student performance each year. The state compiles these estimates into an index; schools that are in the bottom third of the state on the value-added index are placed on a warning list.

School Accountability: Where States Are

States have much work to do in developing and implementing effective policies for turning around low-performing schools. The new federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which likely will mandate these components, will require states to step up the pace of reforms.



Source: Education Week, *"Quality Counts 2001"* and Consortium for Policy Research in Education

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Closing the gaps: As important as overall school performance is, schools also should demonstrate that they are closing achievement gaps among groups of students. The standards movement, after all, is aimed at high standards for all students. Schools where some students perform well but others perform less well have problems. They should not be considered successful even though average performance is acceptable.

Because the most serious gaps separate the performance of whites and racial and ethnic minorities, a handful of states consider the performance of racial and ethnic minorities in determining school performance; six require schools to close the gaps to be considered successful. For example, in Texas, white, black, Hispanic and economically disadvantaged students all must reach the required passing rate for a school to avoid a low-performing designation. Similar systems are in place in California, Maryland, New Mexico and South Carolina, according to the Consortium for Policy Research in Education. More states must attend to the performance of all students, and the federal legislation would require they do so.

Putting it together: How can a state measure school progress to encourage schools to improve performance continually and close achievement gaps? One promising approach is the system about to be implemented in Delaware. The state determines whether students are proficient, whether schools have improved over time and whether the school has reduced the proportion of low-performing students. Using a formula to combine all of these measures, the state compares school progress with statewide targets. Schools that exceed state targets can earn cash awards. Those that fall below the targets can be designated as low performing.

Although Delaware's system does not specifically consider the performance of disadvantaged students, the requirement to raise performance of lower-achieving students will ensure that schools address the needs of all students. And the state publishes data on the performance of all groups and requires schools to use those data in their school plans.

SHINING A SPOTLIGHT

The states that identify low-performing schools use a variety of labels. Some, like Colorado and Florida, assign letter grades to schools and give Ds or Fs to low performers. Others use terms like "academically deficient" or "underperforming."

The effect of receiving a low-performing designation appears to be powerful. Schools often work hard to avoid the stigma of such a designation and to shed the label once it has been applied. States need to do more to shine a spotlight on schools that need improvement and encourage them to step up their efforts to turn themselves around. Experience has shown that publicity can do a great deal to spur improvement, even without any additional action by the state.

States have not always taken full advantage of the power these labels can wield. Often, schools are even unaware that they have been labeled low performing. Under the federal Title I program, which aids schools with disadvantaged students, states and districts are required to identify Title I schools in need of improvement. Yet a recent survey found that in 41 percent of schools that districts identified as needing improvement, the principals were not aware that they had been so designated. If the spotlight can serve any motivating purpose, it has to be turned on.

Moreover, states may not be identifying all the schools that truly are low performing. *Education Week*'s survey found that the number of schools judged low performing ranged from a handful in Kansas, Massachusetts and West Virginia to 3,144 in California. Surely these differences do not reflect only the number or quality of schools in each state. They largely reflect state rating policies. States may have set those policies because of limited resources to assist schools. But a "low-performing" designation should be applied to signal that a school needs help — and all schools that truly need help should be so identified.

STEPPING IN

Designation is only a first step. The second is to provide the assistance low-performing schools need. Data like test scores can signal a problem, but only on-the-ground observation can help educators map out a plan of action. State assistance is crucial in helping schools implement their plans. But despite the rhetoric, states are not interested in literally "taking over" schools. The preferred route is to bring state and local resources to help schools turn themselves around. Some states, such as Kentucky, provide financial assistance and make experts available.

Tips for Policymakers:

- *Have confidence in tests — a lot is riding on them. Make sure they are rigorous and aligned with standards.*
- *Test results should be publicized widely, and school ratings should not be a secret.*
- *Define adequate progress for schools by considering absolute performance, progress over time and success in closing achievement gaps.*
- *Provide assistance before applying sanctions.*
- *When confronting persistently failing schools, don't be afraid to be tough.*

Some of the most effective strategies involve state-trained educators who provide intensive aid to troubled schools. For example, North Carolina sends trained "assistance teams" of experienced educators to help low-performing schools. These teams help schools write and implement improvement plans and make recommendations about the changes needed to bring about improvements. They also evaluate the principal and staff and can recommend replacing teachers or administrators.

The program seems to be working. In its first year, the state assigned assistance teams to 15 schools, and 14 of those reached their target for improved performance. Thirteen schools improved enough to earn cash bonuses from the state.

Few states have provided such intensive and effective assistance — and even North Carolina has stepped up its efforts. There, the state formed a partnership called North Carolina Helping Education in Low-Performing Schools (NC HELPS), a joint project of the governor's office, university system, community colleges, and the state board and department of education. Using federal and state funds, the project provides professional development for teachers and school administrators, along with services like personnel evaluation, curriculum alignment and research. The project also matches schools with agencies and businesses that may have needed expertise.

APPLYING ULTIMATE SANCTIONS

Intervention and assistance can help turn schools around. But what if they do not improve? States must take more serious action. As governors, business leaders and educators at the 1999 National Education Summit pledged in their action statement: "We will be prepared to restructure or reconstitute schools or provide parents and students with other options. The state has a solemn obligation to ensure that no child is trapped in a failing school."

Pressure and Support: How a School Turned Itself Around

Can low-performing schools become high performing? No question about it. The evidence shows that the state accountability systems' pressure, combined with the support states make available, is crucial.

Consider Fessenden Elementary School in Ocala, Fla. In 1999, that school earned an F under the state's rating system, meaning that the school's fourth and fifth graders failed to meet state standards in reading, writing or mathematics. Under Florida's accountability policy, students in schools that receive an F for two of four consecutive years can receive vouchers that can be used in private schools.

As *Education Week* reported, the F rating caused two things to happen. First, the school sprung into action. The principal and staff pored over test results and adjusted the instructional program. The school tested students frequently to assess strengths and weaknesses, reduced class sizes in the early grades, changed reading instruction, provided tutoring for struggling students, and assigned teaching assistants in the fourth and fifth grades.

Second, the state provided assistance. Florida's regional school improvement team linked the school with grant opportunities and other resources; in all, Fessenden secured $400,000 in additional funds. And the team helped provide teachers with intensive professional development.

The result: In one year, Fessenden catapulted from an F to an A — one of only two schools in the state to make that extraordinary leap. As the district's superintendent told *Education Week*, the state's accountability system enabled the school to reach that height. "Unfortunately, it took labeling [Fessenden with] an F to focus us to do what we should have been doing all along and might not otherwise have done," he said.

Many states have laws on the books to provide some sanction for schools that continually fail. But few states actually have applied such penalties. Admittedly, the penalties are harsh, and they could cost some teachers and administrators their jobs. But applying them is essential — and the pending federal legislation would make such sanctions mandatory. Schools need to know that they cannot continue poor performance endlessly; they must be helped to turn themselves around or be put under new management. Without the possibility of sanctions, schools have little incentive to improve.

In addition to the incentives they create, the penalties themselves provide corrective action that could improve schooling right away. For example, Maryland contracts with private school-management firms to operate persistently failing schools; the state has contracted with Edison Schools, Inc., to operate three low-performing schools in Baltimore. These private managers can jump-start a rebuilding of instructional programs that may have eluded the incumbent administration and faculty. A variation of this approach is taking effect in Colorado this year. There, the state authorizes districts to convert schools rated F into charter schools.

Another approach is to give parents funds to pursue other educational options. The federal law pending in Congress would distribute Title I funds to parents of children in low-performing schools to allow them to purchase private tutoring services for their children. This approach provides immediate aid to students, and the threat of a loss of funds could encourage schools to turn themselves around before they get to that point.

States also may have to apply tough measures to turn around struggling districts. In both Illinois and Michigan, the legislature gave control over the states' largest school systems — Chicago and Detroit, respectively — to the mayor, who appointed a new

In the long run, states need to do more to help ensure that schools do not get to the point where they need such intensive intervention.

school board and set a new course for the district. The improvement that Chicago has seen since Illinois took that step in 1995 suggests that such dramatic action can produce results. But all states need to step in when schools and districts are persistently failing. Putting off tough decisions does nothing to help students who continue to attend low-performing schools.

DEVELOPING A CADRE OF LEADERS

In the long run, states need to do more to help ensure that schools do not get to the point where they need such intensive intervention. An effective system is one where there are no failing schools.

Such a system may be a distant dream, but states can move a long way toward that goal by enhancing leadership development. The one consistent theme in reports from schools that have turned themselves around is that there is no substitute for effective leadership. Principals in such schools are true instructional leaders: They emphasize high academic standards for all students and maintain a focus, for themselves and the school, on teaching and learning. They use data on performance to plan curriculum and instructional improvements. They supervise teachers and provide appropriate support for them to improve their instruction.

While some states have made efforts to improve the preparation and ongoing development of principals, a recent study by the Institute for Educational Leadership found that few are equipped to handle their roles in a standards-based system. As that report recommended, states need to ensure that qualified individuals seek jobs as principals, that such individuals are prepared for their positions, and that principals receive ongoing support and professional development.

CONCLUSION

The debate in Congress has placed accountability at the top of the national policy agenda. But accountability does not mean creating winners and losers. It means shining a spotlight on student performance, identifying schools that are low-performing, creating incentives for schools to improve and providing resources to help turn them around. Accountability is essential in a continuously improving education system.

In the long run, states need to move toward a system where all schools function well. In the meantime, though, states have more to do to ensure that all the pieces of a fully functioning accountability system are in place, and they undoubtedly will be challenged to do so by legislation enacted by Congress and the president. States must identify all schools that need help and provide resources and assistance to turn them around. If that happens, the promise of the standards movement will be fulfilled.

Achieve Policy Briefs are regular reports on critical issues in education reform. They are designed to help policymakers, business leaders, educators and others address the challenges they face in improving the nation's schools.

Achieve is an independent, bipartisan, nonprofit organization created by governors and corporate leaders to help raise standards and performance in American schools. Achieve was founded at the 1996 National Education Summit and subsequently sponsored another Summit in the fall of 1999 that brought together more than 100 governors, business leaders and educators from around the nation.

Achieve's principal purposes are to:

- provide sustained public leadership and advocacy for the movement to raise standards and improve student performance;
- help states benchmark their standards, assessments and accountability systems against the best in the country and the world;
- build partnerships that allow states to work together to improve teaching and learning and raise student achievement; and
- serve as a national clearinghouse on education standards and school reform.

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